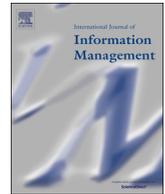




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## Opinion Paper

## Locked-down digital work

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## ABSTRACT

Covid-19 and the related lockdown in many countries made digital work no longer just an option, but the new norm for many office workers who began to make sense of a new range of benefits of digital work tools. Based on my own observations and on observations shared by executives in New Zealand and Europe, I illustrate in this article how the lockdown acted as a facilitator for digital work. Further, I show how the lockdown gave many individuals a flawed impression of digital work, i.e. their experience occurred during exceptional circumstances and led them to draw false conclusions about digital work. I examine some misconceptions of locked-down digital work and discuss the implications of locked-down digital work for research and practice.

## 1. The lockdown as a facilitator for digital work

In March 2020, many governments worldwide decided to take measures to restrict the movement of their population in order to reduce the further spread of COVID-19. Often called 'lockdown', these restrictions mandated the temporary closure of 'non-essential' businesses and forced millions worldwide to work from home. Since in many countries, schools, day-care centres and social venues like restaurants were also closed, the lockdown impacted individuals in different dimensions: mentally, financially, socially (Pan, Cui, & Qian, 2020).

From an information management perspective, it is fascinating to see how the lockdown has made most office workers fully embrace digital work tools like collaboration platforms and video conferencing tools to keep working 100 % remotely in new ways (Davidson, 2020). As one consequence, digital proficiency has risen considerably over just a few weeks:

- Employees have become more adept at using digital work tools, which has brought new routines and habits to their lives. It is crucial to keep in mind that digital work tools are malleable: they incorporate inherent flexibility and openness when enabling and supporting a wide variety of work practices without the need for technical customisation (Richter & Riemer, 2013). Consequently, employees worldwide started experimenting and reflecting on emerging usage scenarios like "virtual morning teas" or "after work (social) zooming".
- Executives have been gaining comfort that work continues even

when their employees are physically distant. As a prominent example, twitter.com announced their employees would be allowed to 'work from home forever' (Paul, 2020). Others are still hesitant; nevertheless: common misconceptions have dissolved in many cases, for example, that remote work reduces the speed of getting things done (Eckhardt, Endter, Giordano, & Somers, 2019) or that workers who are not visible are 'slacking off' (Hafermalz, 2020).

- Organisations have been exploring a broader spectrum of ways to engage with customers, while customers are learning that their needs continue to be fulfilled through different, digital ways of working (Knowles, Ettenson, Lynch, & Dollens, 2020).

Hence, the lockdown has begun to change old mindsets, as well as business and social norms<sup>1</sup>. It has also reminded many that digital work is an excellent opportunity for businesses and society. The lockdown does not only help to reduce travel and the related consequences for our climate (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020). It also allows many employees to connect in new ways, to work more flexibly and to establish new forms of leadership and work autonomy (Dittes, Richter, Richter, & Smolnik, 2019; Richter, Leyer, & Steinhüser, 2020). Many companies have realised that they might have been hit harder if the lockdown had happened 10 years ago when the infrastructure to support digital work was much more primitive and much less efficient.

On the flip side of the coin, studies have discussed the increasingly blurred boundaries between the public and private spheres of our everyday life (Jarrahi, Crowston, Bondar, & Katzy, 2017) and the so-called "constant connectivity" (Dery, Kolb, & MacCormick, 2014) before Covid-19. Due to the lockdown, the line between private and work

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this is not a result of what is now seen as traditional, "human-led innovation", but rather something even more traditional and fundamental: necessity i.e., responding to new, externally imposed requirements.

became thinner for many individuals who were not able to differentiate anymore: “Call with the customer (10–11.30 am), checking on kids’ homeschooling (11.30–11.45 am), then preparing lunch”. This came with consequences for wellbeing and productivity. Individuals have coped in many different ways with the ‘new normal’ (i.e. exclusively working from home).

Based on my observations and on observations shared by executives in New Zealand and Europe<sup>2</sup>, it seems that many employees felt they had more time since working from home. However, even more employees struggled - due to various reasons, for instance: Having to work around kids (who were not at school), sharing the home office with a partner, or difficulties sticking to daily routines. The high amount of video conferences and the complete loss of physical interactions made working from home even more stressful and tiring. Their own first-hand experiences helped executives to become more empathic with their employees. For instance, in regular check-ins, they made sure that their employees were doing ok; they were understanding when some needed time to figure out how to embrace new practices and the above-mentioned ‘blurring boundaries’. It also seems that overall, colleagues shared more private information than they did before.

## 2. Misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown

It is important to note that the above-summarized observations are related to the exceptional circumstances around the lockdown – which, amongst other things, contributed to shaping a false picture of digital work. In order to understand what digital work is and what it is not, it helps to reflect on how digital work during the lockdown has been different to what it can be (and already was for some before the lockdown).

### 2.1. Context: “digital work is (more) stressful and tiring”

Digital work is shaped by practices embedded in an organisational context. During the lockdown most organisations were in ‘crisis mode’. This has been reflected in the type of work that was required: High amounts of (often stressful) coordination work that involved a higher need for (online) meetings, often leading to what has traditionally been called technostress (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011) and now is often related to as ‘zoom fatigue’ (Fosslien & West Duffy, 2020). Accordingly, many employees now seem to think that digital work means more time in meetings than before the lockdown. However, digital work does not only entail (online) meetings. Experienced digital workers like digital nomads (Richter & Richter, 2020; Schlagwein, 2018), who often work across numerous time zones, have figured out ways that reduce the amount of synchronous communication which enables them to focus on productivity.

### 2.2. Adaption and appropriation: “the adaption phase is over”

As a consequence of the malleability of digital work tools, digital work practices often only develop over time as a part of the employees’ sensemaking process (Richter & Riemer, 2013). The lockdown, however, was an extreme situation that did not give them the necessary time. Hence, many employees felt an enormous pressure to ‘make digital work work’ that did not lead to positive associations. Ideally, employees are now given more time to explore and experiment with the tools. The lockdown-driven adaption has started in many cases, but the

<sup>2</sup> My interactions with executives in New Zealand were mainly based on (n > 20) discussions with students of the Executive MBA programme that I lead at the Wellington School of Business and Government. The students work in various industries and government. My interactions with executives in Europe consisted of (n > 10) calls with former project partners in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in various industries.

exploration phase needs to be seen as an open-ended process.

### 2.3. Online vs physical meetings: “digital work means a lot of video conferences”

Many employees have subconsciously or consciously connected digital work with not being able to meet their colleagues. However, digital work did not impose physical distancing. Covid19 did. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that digital work does not impose reducing the number of physical interactions. It instead allows focusing on bonding when meeting physically and for reducing travels to meetings that could also easily be held online. Executives made contradictory statements when it comes to the efficiency of online meetings. They are much easier to set up than physical meetings and hence happened more often. But does that mean they were unnecessary? My conclusion is that online meetings were held in a more ‘ad hoc fashion’, if and when needed, rather than attending meetings scheduled weeks beforehand to accommodate room bookings and efforts to get to the meeting place. However, this needs to be backed up by further research.

### 2.4. Autonomy and visibility: “digital work means I have to prove my value”

Another outcome of the extreme situation of the lockdown relates to the creation of social norms around digital work. In many adoption scenarios before the lockdown, leaders would give their teams and themselves time to make sense of digital work, before they tried to align uses and cooperatively establish norms and rules, for example, how they expect their team members to check-in. This was not yet possible in many companies. Thus, the newly gained autonomy backfired for many employees, who felt they had to justify more often how they spent their workdays. Already in 2013 Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates (2013) showed how an increasing amount of autonomy can have counter-intuitive effects: employees that were allowed to work mobile (hence increasing their autonomy) checked their emails more often, reducing their ability to disconnect from work and reducing their autonomy. Experiences from the lockdown seem to confirm that; Feldman and Mazmanian (2020) note on locked-down digital work: “Because they’re not as visible, employees look for ways to demonstrate that they’re engaged and available. They might assume that they need to make themselves more reachable and responsive than before the move to virtual work, perhaps by working longer hours and replying more quickly to emails. [...] Employees spend more time online, proving they are “there” and less time working productively, which makes coping with their individual needs and circumstances even harder. “To conclude, neither were employees less productive nor perceived most leaders their employees less productive. Often it was the contrary. However, the missing social norms gave employees the feeling they needed to make up for the reduced amount of visibility by communicating more than before (see also Hafermalz, 2020).

## 3. Implications for research and practice

Whereas I was only able to briefly examine these misconceptions on a rather conceptual basis, indicated by NZ and European executives and illustrated based on my observations. Next, I suggest directions for research into the new state of digital work and implications brought about by the lockdown.

First, the recent appropriation of digital work tools by millions of employees worldwide will surface new use cases and related benefits that need to be studied in more detail, in order to understand their impact on an individual and organisational level. Also, it could be meaningful to understand the effects of the ‘ad hoc adoption’ of the tools under such particular circumstances; far from known, planned and controlled implementation scenarios. For instance, executives mentioned that they perceived online meetings less political and more focussed on content. It seems to be useful to study how this ‘ad hoc

adoption' led people to radically question existing face-to-face rituals like the display of power during physical meetings. Furthermore, we need to understand better the benefits and drawbacks of more mixed modes of meetings, e.g. alternating between online (if needed) and in-person (to keep track of progress, build bonds).

Moreover, as the increased amount of telecommuting will likely continue long after the pandemic (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020), it will be interesting to see how remote work in organisations worldwide will change organisational policies and cultures in the long-term. How will organisations enable remote work through facilitation and changes of rules? Against the backdrop of the further increased 'blurring boundaries', how will they support their employees' wellbeing? How will expectations towards the professionalism of work from home change? (Will we still see funny zoom backgrounds and occasional sweatpants in the future?).

Many organisations are only about to begin to understand how locked-down digital work has impacted their operations and what they can learn from it. Consequently, it is reasonable for them to observe how the practices have changed. As a part of sustainable digital work design (Richter, Heinrich, Stocker, & Schwabe, 2018), they can then drive continuous adjustments to their information management landscape by exploring new use practices and promoting beneficial ones. Many organisations will also put efforts in the consolidation of their tool landscape, as the lockdown led to an 'explosion' of the number of the use of digital work tools – similar to what we see already 10–15 years ago when social media wave hit organisations.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, I have introduced the notion of 'locked-down digital work' and explained how the COVID-19-induced lockdown acted as a facilitator for digital work. I have discussed some misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown and implications of locked-down digital work for research and practice.

As an information management researcher and teacher, the lockdown also had significant impacts on my own life and work practices. I have been confronted with students considerably struggling with being confined to their home and having to focus on their studies. Similarly, my colleagues and I have explored new ways of engaging with students and put major efforts in redesigning courses to accommodate the unique situation. In a nutshell, I have been through the same sensemaking as many others. In line with what I have discussed in this article, digital work tools gave and can further provide us with the flexibility we need to cope with the current, evolving situation. It will be interesting to see what we make out of it.

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